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A TABULATION OF THE GERMAN MODALS

The modal auxiliaries always seem to be a stumbling block in the study of German grammar. The chief reason for difficulty in connection with them lies, of course, in the deficiency of the English and the necessary paraphrasing of the modal ideas. Not one of the German modals has an equivalent which always and completely renders the idea into English but each must be translated as the context may demand in some one of a number of ways. The result of so many English "meanings" for the one German word is that the pupil's impressions are at first quite vague and hazy. The question, therefore, presents itself, "How may we gain a definite and accurate conception of the modals for ourselves, and how may we best transmit this conception to our pupils?"

The method of the vest-pocket dictionary will never be successful; a vocabulary can not be a satisfactory one which merely consists of a long list of equivalents; one must know the real "content", the entire range of meaning of a word, and especially is this true in the case of the modals. Often one may bring home to the pupil the true significance of an expression by explaining why or how a particular word or phrase comes to have a given meaning. Where such words are built upon roots already known to the pupil or have a clear historical development, this is comparatively simple. Where such is not the case the teacher must endeavor by definition and illustration to give the pupil an adequate conception of the scope of the word.

In the course of my efforts during several years of teaching to render the modals more easy of comprehension the following table has gradually developed and has proved to be a very satisfactory outline from which to discuss the modals to the class. I claim for it nothing particularly new unless it be the concise and compact arrangement.

Under each of the modals in the table has been given the general idea which is conveyed by it, and it is this general idea which must be impressed upon the pupil. He must in each case know the content and real significance of the modal and not just an English equivalent. He must be lead to think and not merely to remember. *Können* conveys the idea of ability or possibility and is not

	Potential	Dynamic
Dependant upon physical or general conditions or attendant circumstances.	<i>können</i> ability, possibility (can, is able to)	<i>müssen</i> necessity. (must, has to, is compelled to)
Dependant upon an outside agency or moral law.	<i>dürfen</i> permission, permissibility. (may, is permitted to) (nicht dürfen = mustn't)	<i>sollen</i> assertion, intention or determination made with reference to the subject of <i>sollen</i> by an outside agency; a command. (shall, is to, is said to, in past subjunctives—ought to)
Dependant upon the (personal) attitude of the subject itself.	<i>mögen</i> inclination, liking. likelihood, probability, plausibility. (may, like to)	<i>wollen</i> assertion, intention or determination of the subject itself. (will, intends to, is going to, wants to, claims to—in this latter sense with the perfect infinitive, an assertion with reference to past time.)

merely a translation of *can* or *is able to*. *Dürfen* expresses permission or permissibility and is not primarily a translation of certain phases of *may*; *nicht dürfen* indicates the withholding of permission and conveys, therefore, the same idea that is so frequently rendered by the English *mustn't*. *Sollen* and *wollen* are alike in many respects but differ in one very essential point. They both express assertion, intention or determination but in the case of *sollen* the assertion is made by an outside agency with reference to the subject of *sollen*, while in the case of *wollen* it is the subject himself who makes the assertion or expresses the intention or determination. Thus:—*Er soll hier gewesen sein*—He is said to have been here. Rumor reports it, someone else asserts it about him. *Er soll morgen kommen*—He is to come to-morrow. Someone other than he says so. *Du sollst nicht töten!*—The command is given by someone other than the *Du*. But on the other hand:—*Er will hier gewesen sein*—He himself says that he has been here, he *claims* to have been here. He makes the assertion himself. *Er will morgen kommen*—

He *intends* to come to-morrow, he wants to, it is his own plan, he himself is determined upon it. *Mögen* expresses liking or inclination and is parallel to *wollen* in indicating the personal attitude of the subject itself. On the other hand it often expresses what in the mind of the speaker is plausible or admissible or even probable. *Es mag wohl sein*—it *may* be.

The six modals naturally fall into two groups of three and three groups of two. The two larger groups I have designated "Potential" and "Dynamic". The potential modals, *können*, *dürfen* and *mögen* tell us that certain obstacles to action do not exist, or, to put it positively, that certain favorable conditions do exist; *können* informs us that there is physical ability or possibility, *dürfen* that the act is permissible and *mögen* that there is personal inclination or even likelihood, but there is no expression of the necessity of the act taking place, nor actual assertion that it has taken place or is going to, nor determination to that effect. In no case is the action referred to as happening; hence the term, "potential." The dynamic modals on the other hand involve a direct assumption with reference to the consummation of the action; *müssen* takes for granted the possibility and directly expresses the necessity; *sollen* asserts definitely that the action *is* to take place or *has* taken place, while even its subjunctive still insists upon a duty or obligation; *wollen* very clearly states intention and determination.

In the transverse divisions of the table *können* and *müssen* naturally fall together in their expression of an idea dependent upon physical law or general or attendant circumstances; *dürfen* and *sollen* both express the attitude of some outside agency or the working of a moral law; while *mögen* and *wollen* are as clearly parallel in so far as they indicate the attitude of the subject itself.

In the table I have not attempted to specify all the finer shades of meaning. That could only prove detrimental to a treatment whose chief virtue lies in its conciseness and brevity. Many of the so-called "secondary" meanings, however, are mentioned in the table and practically all which are not allow of easy and direct explanation from it. A table of this sort is at best merely an outline, but it does afford concise and available means of associating the modals and at the same time of distinguishing between them.